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## ***What's Wrong with Jeanie Bueller: Reexamining Ferris Bueller's Day Off through Feminist Criticism***

***Will Rumford '12***

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"Life moves pretty fast," says Ferris Bueller in director John Hughes's hit 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. "If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." This line captures the mantra of Ferris Bueller, the film's charming teenaged protagonist, who skips his high school classes to enjoy a beautiful day in Chicago with his friends. The focus of this film is not, as one might expect, the tension of Ferris avoiding getting caught. As cultural anthropologist Michael Moffatt points out in his analysis of the film, it is "clear from the beginning that Ferris will probably get away with everything" (369). The film is instead focused on the character of Ferris, who not only lives out the teenage fantasy of skipping school without punishment but also possesses a dynamic persona that allows him to rise above the social norms and expectations of his environment. In other words, Ferris is someone who overcomes the obstacles of "social circumstance" and is "able to achieve complete self-definition" (Baym 595). By serving as the model for self-definition, Ferris enables his friend Cameron to liberate himself from his father's control. The film's portrayal of self-definition as both possible and attainable for anyone is misleading because it implies that "individuals come before society" and that those individuals are able to determine their own destinies "unhindered" by the constraints of society (Baym 595).

In this essay, I will reexamine *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* using feminist criticism. In order to reexamine this film, I will begin by identifying what its primary themes are. By analyzing the film itself, how it was intended by John Hughes and how it has been interpreted by viewers, I will show that its primary themes are self-definition and self-liberation. I will then apply feminist critical theory to the film to illustrate how its themes support the dominant discourse and patriarchy of American society (Bressler 168). I will show how *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is, at its core, a "melodrama of beset manhood" as described by Nina Baym (594). I will demonstrate how the character of Ferris Bueller is an example of the male-oriented American myth of a person who is "divorced from specific social circumstances" and who is able to "achieve complete self-definition" (Baym 595). Lastly, I will focus on the character of Jeanie Bueller, Ferris's sister, and examine how instead of being afforded the same potential for self-definition as Ferris and Cameron, she is cast "in the melodramatic role of temptress, antagonist, [and] obstacle" to Ferris's mission of liberation (Baym 596). By examining all of these aspects the film through feminist criticism, I contend that the themes of self-definition and self-liberation in *Ferris*



*Bueller's Day Off* privilege males over females and thereby limit their applicability to women or, for that matter, any disadvantaged group of people in society.

*Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is a quintessential "feel good" movie. There is nothing particularly impressive about it in terms of production quality, acting or originality, and yet, there is something about the film that has endeared itself to millions of Americans for the past twenty-four years since its release, including some of the toughest film reviewers and critics in journalism. Chicago Sun-Times columnist Richard Roeper calls it "something of a suicide prevention film," adding, "[*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*] is one of my favorite movies of all time... I can watch it again and again" (1). When the film first released in 1986, prominent critic Roger Ebert wrote, "Here is one of the most innocent movies in a long time," calling it a "sweet, warm hearted comedy" (1-2). Ben Stein, who makes a cameo in the film as a monotonous economics teacher, sums up the appeal of the film: "I don't know if there's ever been a happier movie. It's a movie that you cannot watch without feeling really, really great" ("The World According to Ben Stein"). What is it that makes *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* so uplifting for viewers? The answer lies primarily in the film's themes of self-definition and self-liberation.

The themes of the film are embodied in its main character, Ferris Bueller, and the attitude with which he perceives the world. In an interview conducted after the film's release, writer and director John Hughes explains what his intentions were when he created the character of Ferris. "With Ferris Bueller," Hughes says, "I wanted to do a film that showed someone for whom life was easy. They weren't beset with problems. They weren't labored with all of the difficulties that everyone else is" ("Who is Ferris Bueller?"). The reason Ferris is free from problems is primarily due to his philosophy on life. Ferris is someone who wants to maximize his life, to seize upon opportunities and make the most of them. He knows "life moves fast," so he wants to use that time productively. Mathew Broderick, who played Ferris in the film, says, "He's more than a person. He's an attitude, a way of life and sort of a leader of men" ("Who is Ferris Bueller?"). Ferris is able to act upon his desires no matter what the circumstance might dictate. Whether its faking sickness to skip school, talking his way into an exclusive restaurant, or performing in a parade, Ferris is always able to do what he wants when he wants. Cameron is mystified as to how Ferris is able to do this. He says, "You know, as long as I've known him everything works for him. There's nothing he can't handle. I can't handle anything. School, parents, the future... Ferris can do anything." Ferris's life is "the encapsulation of every person's dream" because he is not constrained by the responsibilities, risks and rules of his environment; he defines what he wants and then does it ("The Word According to Ben Stein"). Because of this, he is the ultimate example of self-definition.

Ferris is able to achieve total self-definition and pursue what makes him happy because he is able to liberate himself from the constraints of society. Herein lies the second major theme of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*: self-liberation. The film assumes that the greatest obstacle to a person achieving self-definition is the inertia and inaction of the individual. Ferris's liberation of himself from his obligation to go to school is a microcosm of his ability to free himself. "A lot of people don't really do whatever they want. A lot of people are so restricted by themselves and by everything around them. I think that the wonderfully attractive thing about Ferris is that he has no restrictions. He sets no restrictions on himself. He will do anything" (Mia Sara - "Who is Ferris Bueller?"). In other words, the restrictions placed on Ferris by his environment are irrelevant; what matters are the restrictions he might put upon himself, like fear, doubt or a lack of self-confidence. "Ferris Bueller tells us we can all have a day [off]" like his, says Ben Stein. "The secret is your own inner mobility and your own inner love of freedom" ("The World According to Ben Stein"). Furthermore, there is an implication that if one is able to liberate oneself, things will work out. The logic of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is that if someone is able to obtain self-definition, self-liberation will follow, regardless of the situation, because a self-defined person is able to determine his or her own destiny.

*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*'s themes of self-definition and self-liberation are inspiring to viewers, but it is clear there is something misleading about those themes when they are seen through the lens of feminist criticism. One of the main goals of feminist criticism, according to Charles Bressler's *Literary Criticism*, is to change "the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read" (168). Reexamining *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* through feminist criticism reveals that the themes of self-definition and self-liberation maintain patriarchy, which is defined by Bressler as "the rule of society and culture by men" (167). The notion that the individual always has the potential to liberate himself is a decidedly male-oriented perspective of society. For women, and for anyone who is not in power, the individual does *not* come before society. Society plays a very real role in affecting the actions and happiness of people. A woman's "inner love of freedom" is not enough to change the impact that society plays in her life ("The World According to Ben Stein"). By looking at *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* through feminist criticism, we can see that the film promotes the dominant discourse of society, especially the American myth of self-definition.

Nina Baym, in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," describes the American myth of self-definition as "the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances" (595). Ferris Bueller is the embodiment of this ideal, of someone who is "able to achieve complete self-definition" (Baym 595). Ferris does what he wants and is not confined by social structures. He is able to do this by asserting his own freedom with which he can "inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature" on the world around him



(Baym 595). His "day off" is a day that is largely within his control. He determines what happens and does not waiver when faced with obstacles to his mission. When Ferris is snubbed at the exclusive restaurant, he insists on trying to get a table when his friends tell him he should back down. Ultimately his persistence pays off and they are able to enjoy a fancy meal in luxurious comfort. No matter what comes his way, Ferris is not fazed and remains steadfast in pursuing his goals for the day. In this way, the film promises that if an individual is able shed his or her self-created limitations, no external obstacle can keep him or her from achieving self-liberation.

This promise assumes that "individuals come before society," and that individuals "exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves" (Baym 595). This assumption, of course, is a misleading one because "nowhere on earth do individuals live apart from social groups" (Baym 595). The American myth ignores the role that society plays in shaping the individual and instead relies on the notion that society is a force that limits the individual. Thus, the core model of American literature can be described as "a melodrama of beset manhood" (Baym 594). These stories revolve around a protagonist's struggle to achieve self-definition in the face of obstacles. If the protagonist is unable to overcome those challenges, it is not the fault of external forces but of the protagonist's inability to rise above those forces. If the protagonist succeeds in overcoming those forces, it is not because of circumstance or luck but because of the protagonist's inner mobility and fortitude. As I have already shown, through examples of his ability to achieve self-definition, Ferris Bueller possesses that "certain believable mobility" that allows him to free himself from the constraints placed on him by his environment (Baym 596).

*Ferris Bueller's Day Off* promises that the mobility that Ferris possesses can be attained by anyone, even by someone who appears hopelessly defeated by life's circumstances like Ferris's friend Cameron. Cameron is, in many ways, the opposite of Ferris. He is indecisive, self-limited, and woefully depressed. The first time the audience sees Cameron is when Ferris calls Cameron to get him to come over. Cameron, who is lying in bed surrounded by tissues and bottles of medicine, tells him, "I can't, stupid. I'm sick." For Ferris, the phrase "I can't" indicates self-limitation. Ferris's worldview is all about possibility. Cameron's, conversely, is about impossibility. "That's all in your head," he tells Cameron. Ferris turns to the camera and explains, "If anybody needs a day off, it's Cameron. He's got a lot of things to sort out before he graduates." Ferris establishes that the root of Cameron's problems lies with Cameron's inaction and self-limitations. Cameron's character is not only meant to contrast with Ferris's but also is used as a demonstration of how self-definition is the key to overcoming one's problems.

Ferris admits that Cameron is in a more difficult situation because of family issues, but still maintains that the primary issue lies with Cameron. "His home life is really twisted," Ferris explains to camera. "That's why he's

sick all the time. It really bothers him." Ferris acknowledges that Cameron's "twisted" family has a significant impact on Cameron. Cameron's mother is never around, his parents hate each other and his father loves his Ferrari more than Cameron. "If I had to live in that house," Ferris says. "I'd probably pray for disease, too." However, Ferris believes that the *real* problem is that it "bothers" Cameron so much that he becomes paralyzed by fear and self-doubt. Once again, we see the American myth of "beset manhood" with Cameron's inability to "achieve complete self-definition" as an individual (Baym 594-595). Cameron's only hope for change is to follow the example that Ferris sets and liberate himself from his problems.

The climax of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is Cameron's self-liberation. Cameron's transformation begins with the discovery that the miles added to the odometer on his father's Ferrari cannot be removed as Ferris had originally thought when they borrowed the car. Faced with the reality that his father will inevitably catch and punish him for using the Ferrari, Cameron makes a defining choice to stand up for himself. "I gotta take a stand," Cameron says to Ferris and Sloane. "I'm bullshit. I put up with everything. My old man pushes me around and I never say anything." Cameron's change in attitude marks a shift in his worldview. "He's not the problem," Cameron says of his father. "I'm the problem." Cameron no longer sees himself as a victim of circumstance but rather as a self-defined individual who has the ability to rise above his circumstances and free himself. "I am not going to sit on my ass as the events that affect me unfold to determine the course of my life," he exclaims. Cameron wants to determine his own destiny free from limitations.

It is important to note that Cameron's main limitation is not his father but his fear of his father. After he kicks and dents the car, he says, "I don't care, I really don't. I'm just tired of being afraid. Hell with him. I can't wait to see the look on the bastard's face." Cameron genuinely believes that if he is free of that fear, he will be able to overcome his father's control. No event can keep him from defining what he wants out of life. Of course, upon asserting this, Cameron accidentally sends the car hurtling out of the back of the garage and completely destroys it. This moment is the greatest test of Cameron's abilities. Instead of giving up and letting Ferris take the blame, Cameron says, "No, I'll take it." Within a short span of time, Cameron has gone from trying to drown himself when the car's odometer has been changed to confidently taking responsibility when the car is wrecked. Cameron gains the inner mobility that Ferris has and therefore is no longer afraid of confronting his father. Now that Cameron's attitude has changed, there is an underlying assumption that things will work out for him despite the severity of the situation. "It's going to be good," he tells Ferris. Cameron has become "divorced from [the constraints of] specific social circumstances" (Baym 595). Like Ferris, he has achieved the American myth of self-definition.



One must be careful not to look at Cameron's transformation purely at face value. By examining Cameron's change through feminist criticism, one can see that it is another example of the male-oriented idea of self-liberation. The mobility that Cameron gains "has until recently been a male prerogative" in American society (Baym 596). While it may appear in the film as though this mobility is available to everyone, this idea is clearly not the case for Jeanie Bueller, Ferris's sister. Jeanie is not able to achieve the same kind of self-definition that Ferris has or that Cameron later gains. Instead, Jeanie is cast "in the melodramatic role of temptress, antagonist, obstacle" to Ferris and whose "mission in life seems to be to ensnare him and deflect him from life's important purposes of self-discovery and self-assertion" (Baym 596). In other words, Jeanie is a classic example of a "stereotypical, male-created" female character, as Charles Bressler puts it in *Literary Criticism* (178). Jeanie is not only the opponent of Ferris but also an example of how the film's notions of self-definition and self-liberation are only applicable for privileged males.

"Wait, you're letting him stay home? I can't believe this." Jeanie says to her parents at the start of the film. "If I was bleeding out my eyes you guys would make me go to school. This is so unfair." Jeanie seems jealous of Ferris because he is able to get away with things that she is not able to get away with. While Ferris is out enjoying his day off, Jeanie is stuck in the confines of the school, brooding about Ferris. "Why should he get to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants?" she asks herself. "Why should everything work out for him? What makes him so goddamn special?" At this point, Jeanie snaps and says, "Screw him." Motivated by her jealousy, Jeanie decides to try to catch him in the act of skipping school.

When Jeanie tries to stop Ferris, things don't work out very well for her. She becomes vilified at school for her apparent indifference to Ferris's sickness. Students start a "Save Ferris" campaign and she is asked by one of them to donate to the cause to buy Ferris a new kidney. She tells the male student to "go piss up a flagpole" and then hits his can of coins out of his hands. As she storms off, he yells, "Hey! What if you need a favor someday from Ferris Bueller? Then where will you be, huh? You heartless wench!" When she returns home to prove that Ferris is out of the house, she runs into Ed Rooney, the principal, who is also there on the same mission. In a confused confrontation between the two, Jeanie does not recognize him and instead knocks him out with a kick to the face. She runs to her room and calls the police, but the police don't believe her when she tells them there is an intruder in her house. Instead, they accuse her of making a phony phone call and she is taken to the police station.

Jeanie's turning point comes at the police station where she gets "some quick therapy" from a "sexy" druggie played by actor Charlie Sheen and, as a result, becomes "reconciled to Ferris" (Moffatt 369). Sheen's character asks Jeanie why she is at the station and she explains how she got in trouble while trying to catch Ferris. He asks her, "So you're pissed off

because he ditches and doesn't get caught? Is that it?" She says yes and he tells her, "Then your problem is you." Jeanie is caught off guard by this accusation. He says, "You ought to spend a little more time dealing with yourself and a little less time worry about what your brother does." The druggie argues that Jeanie's *real* problem is her jealousy. If she were free of that jealousy she could focus on "dealing with herself" and thereby achieve self-liberation. This diagnosis seems to have a profound effect on Jeanie, who ends up making out with the druggie. Jeanie's change comes at the "nick of time" because her change of heart enables Ferris to get off the hook when Ed Rooney catches him behind Ferris's house (Moffatt 369). It appears as though Rooney has Ferris trapped. "I got you, Ferris," he says. "How would you feel about another year of high school, under my close, personal supervision?" Jeanie, at the last moment, saves the day by opening the back door and saying, "Thank God you're alright. You know, we've been worried sick about you." She winks to Ferris and then turns to Rooney. "Thank you Mr. Rooney for driving him home.... Can you imagine someone as sick as Ferris trying to walk home from the hospital? Oh, kids." Thanks to Jeanie's transformation, Rooney is foiled and Ferris succeeds in avoiding punishment. Like Cameron, it appears that Jeanie has learned a valuable lesson about self-liberation.

Has Jeanie really undergone the same transformation as Cameron? Although it appears that she has, the reality is that she has undergone a very different transformation, one from an aggressive, jealous troublemaker to a "passive, meek, and humble" girl (Bressler 173). She is not given the same opportunity to define herself as Cameron does. Imagine if Jeanie was the one who gave Cameron's speech: "*I gotta take a stand...*" "If I was bleeding out my eyes you guys would make me go to school..." "*I put up with everything...*" "Why should he get to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants?" "...*but I never say anything.*" "Why should he get to ditch when everybody else has to go?" "*Hell with him...*" "Screw him..." "This is so unfair..." "*I gotta take a stand.*" The reality is that Jeanie has a monologue that is very similar to Cameron's, but her character is portrayed very differently from his. What makes Jeanie different from Cameron? Why is she not entitled to "take a stand" against the injustice she is experiencing?

From a feminist perspective, we can see that Jeanie's motivation for trying to catch Ferris is not jealousy but a desire to right what is "unfair." She does not have the same ability to achieve self-definition as Ferris does because the American myth's promise that "individuals come before society" does not apply to her (Baym 595). She is the only one who is really able to see the injustice of the situation but she is the one who is punished. The students at her high school believe she is a "heartless wench." The school's receptionist sees that Jeanie is skipping class to catch Ferris and calls her a "little asshole." The police take her to the station instead of helping her when Rooney breaks into her house. While Ferris is out getting away with skipping school, her parents conclude that she's the problem child



of the family. "I just picked up Jeanie at the police station," says her mother when they return home. "She got a speeding ticket, another speeding ticket and I lost the Vermont deal because of her." "I think we should shoot her," says her father. And yet, despite all of these societal forces pushing her around, the druggie at the police station tells Jeanie, "Your problem is you."

If there is any "problem" with Jeanie Bueller, it is that she ultimately gives in to the patriarchy of society by allowing Ferris to get away with skipping school at the end of the film. Why does she let Ferris get away with it? Maybe she honestly believes what the druggie tells her, that she is the problem and that she should not worry about what her brother is doing. Perhaps she is tired of being viewed as an "entraper and impediment" to the self-liberation of men (Baym 598). After all, her pursuit of Ferris has only caused more problems for her. Whatever the reason, it is clear that by saving Ferris, Jeanie is supporting patriarchy, which is indicative of how women in often maintain the very social structures that oppress them.

I want to be clear that by reexamining *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, my goal is not to promote a notion of victimization or to create an impression that the film is about man's oppression of women. To say either of those things would not only cheapen the film, but it would also greatly oversimplify my argument. What I sought to identify in this essay is that *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* has themes of self-definition and self-liberation that are empowering for many individuals but also misleading when considered from a disadvantaged point of view. These themes, as they are portrayed in the film, cannot be applied to women because they assume that society's obstacles can always be overcome through self-definition. The idea of self-definition, however, assumes that the individual has total control over his or her identity and destiny. This is false for most people because society plays a very important part in shaping one's identity and determining one's life path. I am not saying that society necessarily comes before the individual. I am saying that the themes of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* ignore the complex relationship between the individual and society and that this leads to a simplistic view of an individual's mobility in a social context.

Reexamining *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* using feminist criticism reveals that the American myth of self-definition is exactly that: a myth, which is both unattainable and false. Although it is inspiring to believe that one can determine one's own destiny like Ferris Bueller, it is not an accurate depiction of reality because no person can be "divorced from specific social circumstances" (Baym 595). Therefore, self-definition and self-liberation cannot be applied to women, or any disadvantaged group of people, because those ideas assume that every individual has the potential to achieve "self-definition" and can "exist in some meaningful sense" outside of a society (Baym 595). Rather than using this feminist interpretation of the film to undermine its message of inner mobility, I suggest that *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* should be perceived with the knowledge that its themes cannot be applied to everyone. Furthermore, I contend that the character of Jeanie, who

appears to be a jealous adversary to Ferris, is actually a woman seeking justice in a male-dominated society. With this idea in mind, Ferris's mantra takes on a whole new meaning for those people who believe that self-liberation is possible for anyone. Privileged members of society must remember that life is filled with injustice and inequality. "If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

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My argument, what I sought to identify in this essay is that *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* promotes a self-definition and self-liberation that are empowering to many individuals but also misleading when considered from a disenchanted point of view. These themes, as they are portrayed in the film, cannot be applied to women because they assume that society's obstacles can always be overcome through self-definition. The idea of self-definition, however, assumes that the individual has total control over his or her identity and destiny. This is false for most people because society plays a very important part in shaping one's identity and determining one's life path. I am not saying that society necessarily controls the individual. I am saying that the theme of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* ignores the complex relationship between the individual and society and that this leads to a simplistic view of an individual's mobility in a social context.

Reexamining *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* using feminist criticism reveals that the American myth of self-definition is actually that a myth, which is both unsustainable and false. Although it is inspiring to believe that one can determine one's own destiny like Ferris Bueller, it is not an accurate depiction of reality for that no person can be "divorced from specific social circumstances" (Bayer 399). Therefore, self-definition and self-liberation cannot be applied to women, or any disenfranchised group of people, because these ideas assume that every individual has the potential to achieve "self-definition" and can "exist in some meaningful sense" outside of society (Bayer 395). Rather than using this feminist interpretation of the film to undermine the message of inner mobility, I suggest that *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* should be perceived with the knowledge that its themes cannot be applied to everyone. Furthermore, I contend that the character of Jeanie, who